R.L. DRAKE CO.
The Passing of a Legend

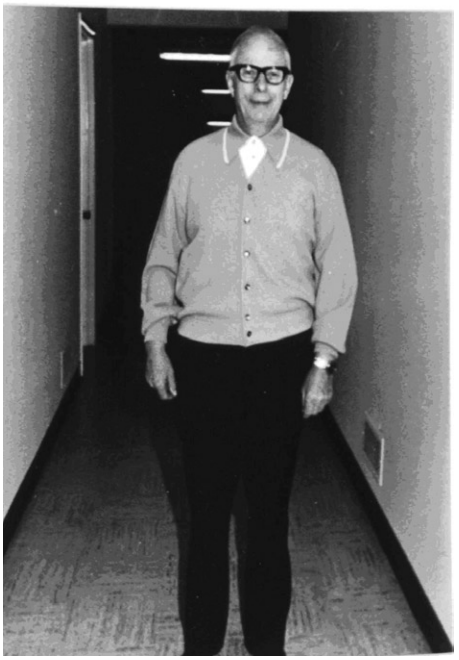
By Bob Grove

The recent announcement of R.L. Drake to cease production of all radio products was met with sadness by the shortwave and amateur radio industry. Drake was the last major U.S. manufacturer of stand-alone shortwave communications receivers for the consumer. Their venerable R8 series had become a standard of comparison to which other models were compared.

In proper perspective, the decision was inevitable. Although orders for the R8B remained steady, they weren't strong enough to justify continued production. To justify another assembly run, large quantities of components would have to be purchased – now at inflated prices. The selling price would have to have been increased substantially, reducing sales potential even further.

A Look Back

Robert Lloyd ("Bob") Drake was a visionary from Miamisburg, Ohio, producing radio accessories for the military during World War II as he founded the R.L. Drake Company in 1943. Sensing the need for cutting-edge designs for the emerging single-sideband (SSB) amateur radio market after the war, Bob led the design effort for his first receiver, the Drake 1-A in 1957.



Robert Lloyd "Bob" Drake, Sr 1910-1975

Engineer Ray Midkiff at working a research and development station in the mid-70s. Photo courtesy R.L. Drake Company.

As a young ham growing up in Rocky River, Ohio, I was using old military surplus for my shack. I remember the introduction of Drake, wishing I could use some of my college money to buy one of their receivers!

The remarkable acceptance of this product led to improved models, then to the transmitter and transceiver equipment as well. Marine radios and home TV terminals followed. The company earned a reputation of high respect; the equipment worked well, was meticulously crafted, and affordable.

Bob Drake passed away in 1975, but his legacy continued for the next three decades through the integrity of his carefully-chosen staff. The emphasis on quality, performance, and cutting-edge technology persisted as new products were envisioned, designed and manufactured.

The reverence for Drake equipment has taken a cult-like image. Drake collectors show their prizes with great pride (See the Drake Virtual Museum on the Belgian Internet site: **http://www.dproducts.be/drake%5Fmuseum/index.htm**). With the cessation of the radio line, valuation of these collectibles is bound to increase.

But the name continues. R.L. Drake is well respected in another market: video products. Head ends for satellite and cable TV systems

Now THAT'S Quality!

A QC check at Drake was not like the "final system test" procedure that all TR-7s went through… [Glenn Davis's] TR-7 checks included all of the following:

Power output, all modes on all bands.
Power amplifier SWR foldback and signal flattopping.
Spurious emissions and second and third harmonics.
Synthesizer phase noise.
CW keying characteristics.
VOX operation.
Accurate setup and stability of all oscillators.
PTO tracking, output purity, and drift performance against the temperature specifications.
Receiver sensitivity and selectivity, all modes on all bands and through all IF filters.
Third and fifth-order intercepts and receiver noise floor.
BFO leakage (double-checked).
Intermodulation (IM) distortion.
Noise blanker and Auxiliary board, if installed.
Incorporation of engineering change orders.
All solder joints and connectors.

In addition, Davis placed some of his victims into their shipping cartons, put them on a shake table, and left them bouncing around to simulate the rigors of transit. (A few boxed-up radios were also dropped a few feet.) After the "trip," Davis would rerun the complete list of QC checks...

The bottom line: Customers were well served and Drake's reputation for quality was preserved. That's all that mattered. "

From *A Family Affair,* pp.85-86

Final System Test (FST) area during the early 1970s. Only the best production technicians were chosen to work in FST and only the best of the best worked on the TR-4 radios. Photo courtesy R.L. Drake Company.

A Family Affair
The R.L. Drake Story

Bigger is better. Such was the philosophy of American industry in the mid-1950s. … To appeal to radio amateurs' machismo, Hallicrafters, National, and Hammarlund introduced ever larger models...

At the same time, a very different, very odd and very innovative radio was being conceived in central Ohio. The name chosen for Bob Drake's first radio was the 1-A. 1-A was an unimaginative model number for a revolutionary design concept. Only seven inches wide and under 20 pounds, this single sideband receiver was the antithesis of everything else on the market.

The ancestor of many models to come, the 1-A was clearly no boat anchor. This radio was the product of clean-slate, outside-the-box thinking. The 1-A was physically everything the competition was not. Small, easy to use and focused on the new upstart mode called single sideband, it would provide value not previously available. This receiver was superior in performance to its contemporaries at a fraction of the size, weight, and price. This pace-setting radio broke the long-standing trend of building larger, ever heavier receivers. The historical significance of this model is not being overlooked by astute collectors, as witnessed by recent eBay realizations near $1,000.

Every amateur knew the R.L. Drake Co. by the time it became a leading market force in the 1960s and '70s. In fact, many hams (and shortwave listeners) either owned Drake equipment or wanted to. As a shortwave listener in the late '60s, I personally lusted in my heart for the Drake SPR-4 receiver. In those days of dismal dial accuracy on the international broadcast bands, the SPR-4 permitted tuning to ±1 kHz. Today's shortwave listeners, using digital-readout radios, can scarcely appreciate this astounding accomplishment. Frequency accuracy was the No. 1 challenge for SWLs in the pre-digital age. Knowing what frequency you were on, and being able to return to it, was a continual challenge. The Drake SW-4 and SPR-4 models would solve this problem, earning a loyal following of shortwave listeners.

Drake's involvement in the amateur market eventually declined, but not as a result of the so-called rice box invasion (as the popular, pejorative, and politically incorrect term is used). This book reveals the real reasons. …

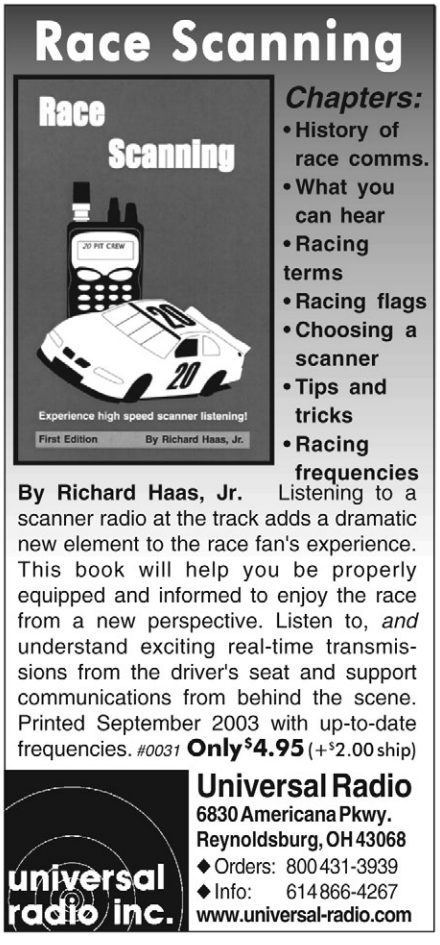
Fred Osterman N8EKU
Universal Radio Inc.
Author, *Receivers Past and Present*

The foregoing is extracted from the foreword to an excellent photo-biography of the man and his company in the book, *A Family Affair–The R.L Drake Story* by John Loughmiller, KB9AT. Written after Drake discontinued its amateur line, but before cessation of the R8A receiver, *A Family Affair* is an honest, entertaining and educational look at the realities of radio design, trends in the radio hobby, and the operation of a family-owned business. If a good read isn't enough of a draw, the second half of the book includes 300 or so pages of technical tips, troubleshooting, mods, and appendices for Drake amateur radios.

The book is available for $24.90 plus $4.95 shipping from Universal Radio, 6830 Americana Parkway, Reynoldsburg, OH 43068-4113, or by calling toll-free (800) 431-3939.

like the "Lodgenet" line are widely utilized in motels. And their trusted service department will continue as well, providing support for their previous radio models as long as parts are available.

Our hats are removed in a salute to a fine American manufacturer, the R.L. Drake Company. May they continue to provide excellence in their redirection – the growing video market.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